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Self-Branding on Social Media: An Analysis of Style Bloggers on Instagram

Rendan Liu*, Ayoung Suh

School of Creative Media, 18 Tat Hong Avenue, Kowloon Tong, City University of Hong Kong, China

Abstract

The concept of self-branding is prevalent in society today due to the emergence and growth of various social media platforms. In particular, this new digital media environment has empowered especially women to market themselves as brands. Despite increasing scholarly and practical attention being paid to the influence of social media on individuals' self-branding practices, little empirical research has systematically examined how people use social media as a tool to establish their branded-selves. Using a content analysis method, we analyzed 243 posts from the top 10 style bloggers' Instagram accounts according to a systematic coding scheme. The results of our analysis indicate that although most leading style bloggers still adhere to traditional beauty and hierarchic criteria, social media provides great opportunities for women to establish their branded-selves and allows them to market themselves in line with the increase of awareness of women's rights. Results also show that a huge number of the style bloggers' followers are influenced by the way the bloggers use technological functions along with their modes to present themselves, through which they become emotionally attached to the bloggers. Based on these findings, we discuss academic and practical implications for self-branding via using social media.

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Keywords: Self-branding; Social Media; Postfeminism; Instagram; Self-presentation; Blogger

1. Introduction

There is an increasing trend on social media platforms of users trying to market themselves as brands to gain attention and cultural and monetary value, especially among the subculture of personal style bloggers. These bloggers

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +852-6687-5175.

E-mail address: rendanliu2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk

are primarily young women who post pictures of their outfits and their possessions and comment on fashion-related issues and products [1]. Due to their large numbers of followers, some well-known style bloggers are influential and attain fame in both online and offline worlds. They enjoy such popularity because social media platforms have established a public persona [2], where the individual choice, autonomy, empowerment, and independence of women are emphasized.

Evidence shows that style bloggers who use social media as a platform to establish their self-brands enjoy high levels of creativity and self-expression; they do not have to follow the conventional fashion mold—i.e., thin, tall, white, and rich [3]. This seemingly upends the traditional fashion realm, which includes fashion magazines and runways shows. Nevertheless, the obsession with investing time and finances into new technology with revolutionary potential, such as social media, obscures the fact that style bloggers who promote themselves online are still firmly contextualized in a neoliberal capitalist framework and reinforce the existing hierarchies of class, gender, aesthetics, and tastes [1]. This study seeks to address this controversy by investigating style bloggers' self-branding practices on Instagram. Specifically, we address the following questions:

(1) *How do people establish their branded-selves on a social media platform?*

(2) *What are the distinct technological features of social media as a tool for self-branding?*

To answer these questions, we examined style bloggers on an image-based social media platform, Instagram. Instagram is a rapidly growing visual self-branding tool; it has become the most popular and largest photo-sharing social media platform in the world, with 600 million monthly active users [4]. Furthermore, Instagram users have the highest scores for showing affection for and following fashion trends compared with three other mainstream social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat) [5]. Given that the Internet is increasingly turning into a visual medium and more and more individuals are using images to express themselves, we believe that Instagram is an appropriate platform for examining individual users' self-branding practices.

This study contributes to both the academic and practical fields. For academia, this study extends the use and gratification theory [6-10] by explaining how women use social media to satisfy their need for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment [11]. Regarding the practical significance of this research, the findings of this study can help marketers understand audiences' preferences for and interests in fashion and style-related products.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-branding on social media

Research on self-branding has flourished in recent years due to the development of various kinds of self-marketing platforms online. The literature on self-branding encompasses various disciplines, including business, marketing, media and communication, and computer sciences [12-19]. The term self-branding was first coined by Tom Peter [20] in his article titled "The Brand Called You." He argued that the main promise of self-branding is that everyone has the power to be their own brand and that a person's main job is to be their own marketer. In recent academic research, self-branding has been mainly reviewed as a set of practices, a mindset, and/or a way of remaking the self as a salable commodity to attract attention and acquire cultural and monetary value through social media platforms [16] [21].

Both statements imply that the self-branding practice provides social media users with enormous autonomy. However, the concept of self-branding is inherently contradictory and is contextualized in the neoliberal capitalism [1] [13] because it promotes both authenticity and business-targeted self-presentation [17]. This means that the rewarding branded-self has to cater to the taste and need of the mainstream market. As Hearn [13] pointed out, "Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries". Marwick [22] also confirms the connection between self-branding practices and the mainstream market, arguing that those people who have a famous branded-self on Instagram reinforce the traditional hierarchy of fame by attracting their audiences using the strategies similar to those employed by traditional celebrities, such as disciplined bodies, sports cars, and clothing from high-end brands.

Research has identified authenticity as a very unclear concept in the field of self-branding. Although authenticity is defined as "something real, something true, something moral, something apart from the crass, commercial, social

world,” [1] scholars have argued that it is hard to maintain authenticity during the process of constructing branded personae due to the market-oriented attributes of self-branding [1]. However, Banet-Weiser [23] claims that in the new media society, economic imperatives and authenticity co-exist in a complex way: Even in social media, which is saturated with celebrity culture and marketing rhetoric, the narratives of authenticity and realness have a significant presence [24]. Therefore, authenticity also acts to differentiate self-branding on social media from that on other platforms.

2.2. Goffman's gender advertisements framework

This study employs the gender advertisements framework proposed by Goffman [25] as an overarching theoretical platform. The framework explains the different genders displayed in advertisements and proposes codes that can be used to identify the way gender is displayed. According to the framework, gender is portrayed using the following elements: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal. Goffman [25] points out that females are limited in a subordinate and submissive manner when they are portrayed in the popular media.

Goffman [25] eschewed examination of the sexualization of women because the sexual objectification of women in popular media was the target of the “second-wave” feminists who launched campaigns to cover such advertisements [26-27]. Perhaps the sexual objectification of women portrayed in popular media today is obvious enough and will decrease over time due to feminists’ efforts. However, the contemporary study of gender advertisements still applies Goffman’s analytical framework to examine the sexualization and objectification of women [25]. Scholars address this mismatch by adding variables intended to capture sexualization [28-30]. For instance, Kang [24] added two more categories to Goffman’s coding scheme: body display and independence. In particular, the new variables reveal that there is a substantial increase of nude or partially nude images of women. These studies have contributed to the empirical examination of women’s sexualization and objectification in popular media at certain times.

On the other hand, some studies that employed the gender advertisements framework have also observed significant changes (or lack thereof) in the presentation of gender in popular culture over time [28][31][32]. For example, Bell and Milice [31] pointed out that the images of women in Australian magazines in 2002 showed few changes from Goffman’s framework proposed in 1979. Lindner [29] also confirms similar results in his study regarding images shown in the *Times* and *Vogue* magazines. Because the main purpose of this study is to examine how people present themselves and establish their branded-selves on social media, this study employs Goffman’s gender advertisements framework. In so doing, this study systematically analyzes the way gender is displayed on an image-based social media platform (i.e., Instagram) and thereby explores how social media users portray themselves using images displayed on a digital environment.

2.3. Postfeminism

Researchers have linked the concept of self-branding to the gender discourse using the logic of contemporary postfeminism [23]. Postfeminism emphasizes autonomy, independence, and self-expression of girls and young women that are deeply rooted in the consumer marketplace. Regarding the concept of women’s self-branding, numerous interrelated themes have been discussed in the past studies, including the notion that femininity is a bodily property, or a shift from objectification to subjectification [32]. McRobbie [33] posits that the postfeminist tropes of individual choice and freedom are inextricably connected with their unruly subjects—“young women” response to the seemingly aged and redundant feminism. Actually, postfeminism indicates a tendency to intertwine the feminist and antifeminist discourses because “on the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of ‘can-do’ girl power, yet on the other hand, their bodies are re-inscribed as sexual objects” [32] oriented by the neoliberal capitalism.

Postfeminism is associated with the values and ideas of neoliberalism [13]. Since the subject of neoliberal capitalism works on himself or herself and relies on his or her own hard work, he or she presents their branded-selves meaningfully through a narrative of autonomy and free choice [16][32]. Thus, the neoliberal ideology of individualism and self-discipline encourages the development of calculated strategies of self-branding. As Gill points out, “neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors,” [32] and much of the self-branding research has examined these subjects through the lens of entrepreneurship. For instance, Duffy and Hund

[13] argue that style bloggers depict and encourage the autonomy, self-discovery, and self-expression attributes of the postfeminist discourse.

On the other hand, some scholars assert that postfeminism denies feminism as a collective political activity while celebrating women's empowerment in an apolitical and capitalist way [23]. Therefore, the postfeminist branded-self is constructed by young women's bodily displays and narratives of authenticity and realness. Regarding neoliberal capitalism, research related to postfeminist self-branding emphasizes the promotional nature of self-branding so as to cater to the market. However, few studies have focused on the normative feminist narrative and presence in the postfeminism context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling and data collection

In this study, we employed the content analysis method to empirically analyze user profiles and the patterns underlying the use of photography and technological functions (i.e., Hashtag, tag, and @) on the Instagram. Content analysis is a systematic, objective, and quantitative description of the manifest content in communication.³⁶

We chose top 10 style bloggers on Instagram according to the latest version “The 20 Most Influential Personal Style Bloggers” ranking list published on Fashionista in March, 2016 [37]. This list includes both male and female style bloggers. However, given that this study focuses on females, the top 10 female style bloggers were selected for analysis in order to ensure all those style bloggers we analyze are women. Besides, those bloggers are famous successful enough engaging in self-branding so they are representative for this study. The website editors' standards for the selection of the world's most influential personal style bloggers were as follows: (1) website traffic, indicating the number of people these bloggers reach everyday; (2) brand extensions, which refers to the bloggers being rewarded for launching their own lines or collaborations; (3) whether the bloggers worked or partnered with higher-end brands; and (4) searching Google News to see how often the style bloggers were mentioned in headlines as a practical measurement of their influence. These four standards were tightly align with the practice and results of self-branding so they are solid enough to define the top 10 style bloggers in this study.

We conducted a random stratified sampling of proportional allocation to make sure the sample was representative. We chose a whole month, January 1 to January 31, 2017 for data collection because the Women's March, a significant women's protest march, occurred during this time period. Some female style bloggers supported this event by using their influence to protect women's rights. This event is also closely related to the concept of feminism. A total of 732 posts were collected from the 10 most influential style bloggers' Instagram feeds. The images for the final sample were the ones that received the most “likes” from flowers which could significantly reflect the audiences' preferences and the acceptance of style bloggers' branded selves. Finally, 243 posts from the 10 style bloggers were analyzed. Fig. 1 presents one of the photos posted by the most popular style blogger on Instagram. Table 1 presents information on sample collection.



Fig. 1. Instagram image of Chiara Ferragni (@chiaraferragni) starting Couture Week

Table 1. Sample collection

Blogger	Number of Followers on Instagram	Total Number of Photos (January, 2017)	Number of Photos Analyzed
Chiara Ferragni	8.7M	178	59
Aimee Song	4.5M	76	25
Kristina Bazan	2.4M	76	25
Julia Engel	1M	45	15
Wendy Nguyen	1.1M	46	15
Julie Sariana	4.4M	78	26
Blair Eadie	1M	41	14
Chriselle Lim	863K	116	39
Gala Gonzalez	755K	55	18
Nicole Warne	1.7M	21	7

3.2. Development of coding categories

We first analyzed the profile descriptions of the 10 most popular style bloggers. Then, we evaluated the Instagram posts of those bloggers according to three categories— image content, composition element and external relationship.

The image content category was mainly used to evaluate the feminist presentation, utilizing the gender advertisements framework proposed by Goffman [25]. The framework includes five subconcepts: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordinate, and licensed withdrawal. Seven subgroups—stance, pose, touch, withdrawal, body display, breasts area, and braless—were designed to study gender display. In addition, for the image content category, we also combined the coding schemes from Kang [28], Hatton and Trautner [38], and Hu et. al. [39]. We then selected 10 categories to evaluate the image content of each post. For the photography composition element, we adapted a coding scheme from Ramos-Serrano and Martnez-Garca [40] to take three subgroups into consideration (type of shot, camera angle, and visual composition). To evaluate the posts' external relationships, the usage of Instagram technological attributes was employed and each post was coded for the following 15 items as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Content analysis coding scheme

Category	Subcategories and their coding scheme
Image Content	· Theme (selfie:1, portraits:2, friends/family:3, food:4, gadgets:5, pets:6, activity:7, captioned photos:8, landscape:9, fashion:10)
	· Number of people in the photograph (solo:1, two to three:2, group:3, none:4)
	· Stance (posed leg bent:1, sitting:2, walking:3, standing:4, squatting down:5, lying:6, other:7)
	· Pose (normal:1, suggestive:2, overly sexual:3)
	· Touch (no touch:1, casual touch:2, provocation touch:3)
	· Withdrawal (gazing the viewer:1, averting gaze:2, covering face:3, back to the camera:4)
	· Body display (unrevealing:1, slightly revealing:2, revealing:3, naked:4)
	· Breasts area (not a focal point:1, somewhat emphasized:2, major focus:3)
	· Braless (yes:1, no:2, unknown:3)
	· Type of shot (close shot:1, medium shot:2, wide shot:3, cut-in shot:4)
Composition element	· Camera angle (high:1, low:2, eye angle:3)
	· Visual composition (the rule of thirds:1, highlighted:2)

Category	Subcategories and their coding scheme
External relationship	· Tag (brand:1, people:2, other:3, none:4)
	· Hashtag (brand:1, people:2, other:3, none:4)
	· @ (brand:1, people:2, other:3, none:4)

4. Results and analysis

The results show that the self-portrait theme was the most popular (63%), followed by the friends/ family theme (21%) and the landscape theme (6%). However, the selfie theme was not popular among the top style bloggers—only three of the photographs analyzed were selfies. Regarding the number of people in the photographs, it has been found that the majority of the photos were solo photos (69%)—i.e., the style blogger alone in the photos (except for one photographed of Chaira Ferragni’s boyfriend). The remaining photos were of two to three people (18%), nobody (11%), or a group of people (2%).

For the seven categories for examining gender display using the Goffman’s scheme, we excluded the photos that did not include the style bloggers themselves from the analysis to get a more accurate feminist presentation. Thus, 205 posts were analyzed. The results show that 58% of the photos framed style bloggers in a standing stance, 24% of the photos framed them sitting, and 11% of the photos framed them walking. In contrast, only 3% of the photos pictured the style bloggers lying or squatting down. Regarding pose, it was found that the largest percentage of the photos were shot in a normal pose (68%). The proportions of suggestive poses and overly sexual poses were 31% and 1%, respectively. Regarding touch, 72% of the photos showed the style blogger casually touching something or being touched, and there were 8 pictures that presented provocative touch. In terms of withdrawal, 48% and 47% of the photographs featured the style bloggers gazing at the viewer and averting their gaze, respectively. The style bloggers had their backs to the camera in 10 photos. When looking at body display, 52% featured the style bloggers in unrevealing clothing, followed closely by slightly revealing (35%). There were two photos that showed the style blogger with a naked upper body. For the breast areas, it was found that 90% of the photos did not focus on the breast area. Going braless is an emerging trend among women, especially Western women, to demonstrate women’s rights. In this analysis, it was found that 16% of the photographs featured the style bloggers braless.

Regarding the type of shot, the most popular types of shot were the wide shot (48%) and medium shot (43%). The camera angle refers to the observer’s point of view: 60% of the photos were taken at approximately eye level, and 28% of the photos were photographed from a high level. In terms of visual composition, most of the style bloggers were placed in the center of the photos (57%), and 43% of the photos followed the rule of thirds. When considering the external relationship, Tag People was a commonly used function inserted in the images; 65% of the posts used this function on Instagram. Among all the posts analyzed in this study, 44% of the posts showed brand tags and 20% of the posts featured people tags. The hashtag and @ are located in the captions of posts. More than half of the posts contained hashtags, and the proportion of brand hashtags was the highest (30%) compared with people and other kinds of hashtags. For @, 62% of the posts did not include any @. Similar to the findings for the hashtags, @ brand was the most prevalent kind of @ among these posts.

5. Discussion

All of the style bloggers included in this study were white or Asian young women with disciplined bodies. There were no black or overweight girls on the list. This confirms that the beauty criteria of the postfeminism movement are consistent with the traditional ones. However, we did notice a rise in women’s rights awareness through the posts, of these style bloggers. As shown in the results of the analysis, 68% of the images featured normal posts and the stances of these style bloggers were not sexual. In addition, most of these style bloggers preferred wearing unrevealing clothes, and they did not emphasize the breast area in the photos. All these factors suggest that they do not really rely on the consumption of sexual bodily displays, which is consistent with the main notion of the postfeminism. According to Goffman,⁴¹ by altering the viewer’s gaze or turning the body, women can appear to be independent or helpless and unaware of their surroundings. Nevertheless, we found that the number of photos picturing the style bloggers gazing

at the photographer and averting gazes were almost the same. Accordingly, Goffman's hypothesis that women are depicted as less powerful than men does not work in this context. Furthermore, Goffman indicates that feminine touch suggests that women are delicate, fragile, and sexually available and accessible [41]. However, the results of this study are not in line with Goffman's finding. Furthermore, the 33 pictures where the bloggers are braless also emphasizes the awareness of fighting for women's rights. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that style bloggers prefer to present themselves as independent women.

For building external relationships, we found that the style bloggers were actively using Tag People function compared to the other two technology functions (i.e., hashtag and @). Tags are not directly shown on the pictures that the style bloggers upload—the tags cannot be seen unless the viewers tag the photos. The hidden attribute of this function enables the style bloggers to develop relationships with other commercial brands in an imperceptible and latent way. Besides, style bloggers prefer to build links with specific commercial brands for various promotional purposes. By using these function, the style bloggers were able to establish and maintain good relationships with other commercial brands to further collaborate with them, which in turn leads to gaining both social and monetary capital. For tags, hashtags or @ people, some of the people being linked are already celebrities. So, the style bloggers can use the popularity of her friends or partners to increase exposure and expand awareness.

Also, after the analyzing of the data from top 10 style bloggers, we found that the portraits that pictured the style bloggers alone had the most attractive theme in regard to self-presentation. We also found that the photos with friends or family were a good way to gain popularity because they could convey a sense of authenticity. For the composition element, the middle shots and wide shots were more popular since those photos included more information—after all, a picture is worth a thousand words. Furthermore, the photos in which the subjects were placed in the middle of the frame and were taken at eye level were the most popular. In terms of the utilization of technology functions, Tag People is an efficient way to help users connect with others. Since how many times the pictures are viewed by the audience are synonymous with online success, using hashtags is also an effective approach to increase exposure and further gain website traffic and popularity.

This study has filled the gap in our understanding of how people present themselves and establish their branded selves on a social media platform. To our best knowledge, the present study is the first attempt to empirically examine the way most influential style bloggers use the technological functions to attract people and establish their branded-selves. In particular, we reexamined the Goffman's gender advertisements framework to enrich our understanding of self-branding on social media. Our work suggests that the conventional framework that has been widely adopted in media research regarding self-presentation and self-branding practice needs to be revisited and revised in the digital area; this is because the use of social media empowers people to present themselves in a different way beyond the conventional frame imposed to women. Our work also suggests that technological functions provided by social media facilitate people to express their authentic selves, which turns to online fame. As more ordinary people can become celebrities online, our research paves the way to broadening our understanding of the role of social media in promoting self as a brand in the digital environment. Our coding schemes can help researchers to test, verify, and revise the conventional gender advertisements framework in the diverse online environments.

In this article, we have provided some strategies for social media users who want to reach a wide audience and achieve fame. For example, to create appealing post content they can increase a sense of authenticity by posting photos of family or friends from time to time, which leads their audience to more close attention to compositional elements. In addition, they can increase online exposure by using hashtags and taking advantage of the celebrities' reputations, and to maintain unity of a brand, all the posts on an Instagram account should have a consistent tone and style. Further, developing friendly relations with other related specific brands achieves a leveraging effect to promote the branded-selves.

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